

VZCZCXRO3579
RR RUEHDT RUEHPB
DE RUEHHM #1490 3600842
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 260842Z DEC 06
FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1920
INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI 1407
RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE
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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 001490

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [PREF](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: THE BEST CHRISTMAS YET IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

¶1. (SBU) Key contacts in the Catholic and Protestant communities told ConGen on December 26 that they were very pleased with how the 2006 Christmas season unfolded. The Secretary General of the GVN-recognized Southern

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Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) -- Vietnam's largest Protestant organization -- told us that he had not received any reports of incidents. In separate phone conversations, SECV representatives in the Central Highlands provinces of Gia Lai and Dak Lak added that Christmas celebrations were more relaxed this year than in the past. They characterized local Central Highlands officials as "more open" and "more sincere" and less prone to lecture them about the importance of "maintaining social order."

¶2. (SBU) Leaders of key registered and unregistered house church groups indicated that this was their easiest Christmas in Vietnam since 1975. Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan of the United Gospel Outreach Church told us that he was able to rent the auditorium of the HCMC chapter of the Fatherland Front's Union of Friendship Organizations to hold services for his group. The UGOC had another gathering for 1,500 worshipers in Can Tho, in the Mekong Delta. Pastor Samuel Lam, head of the Assembly of God (AOG), told us that he was able to hold services for 1,800 persons in a rented theater in HCMC. Another AOG congregation of 300 in suburban HCMC was able to gather as one large group for the first time ever. Pastor Nguyen Toi, head of the Danang-based United World Mission Church (UWMC) told us that, with the exception of one congregation in rural Quang Ngai province, all 20,000 members of his church -- many in the Central Highlands province of Kontum -- were able to celebrate without interference. Two large Baptist groups also were able to hold large gatherings in HCMC, Hanoi and the Central Highlands.

¶3. (SBU) Our contacts reported a few incidents in which local officials attempted to ban Christmas gatherings. However, this year, church leaders generally were able to get quick redress from central- and provincial-level officials. For example, in the case of the UWMC congregation in Quang Ngai, Pastor Toi worked with the central-level Committee for Religious Affairs to overturn the local edict. In another case, HCMC CRA and Department of Culture and Information officials worked late into the evening on December 23 to help organize the Christmas celebrations of the Assembly of God in a public theater in HCMC. Pastor Nguyen Ngoc Hien of the Vietnam Baptist Fellowship reported that one congregation was unable to gain permission from local Hanoi authorities to hold services in a hotel; the group was forced to use an alternative location in a neighboring province, where they celebrated without incident. Local police in Thieu Vien commune in the northern province of Thanh Hoa sought to

halt a service of a UGOC-affiliated house church. Pastor Nhan explained that this village is notorious for its efforts to suppress Protestant house churches.

14. (SBU) Comment: In the run-up to Christmas, provincial CRA officials emphasized to us that they were under strict instruction to ensure a successful holiday season. For example, HCMC authorities instructed all localities to facilitate house church celebrations. Although incidents at the local level -- especially in remote rural areas continue to occur -- they are significantly fewer in number less severe than in the past. Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of this Christmas season is that house church leaders and central and provincial government CRA officials are beginning to work together to resolve problems at local levels. End Comment.

WINNICK